

Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

The **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution** or the Southeast Asia Resolution, Pub.L. 88-408, 78 Stat. 384, enacted August 10, 1964, was a joint resolution that the United States Congress passed on August 7, 1964, in response to the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

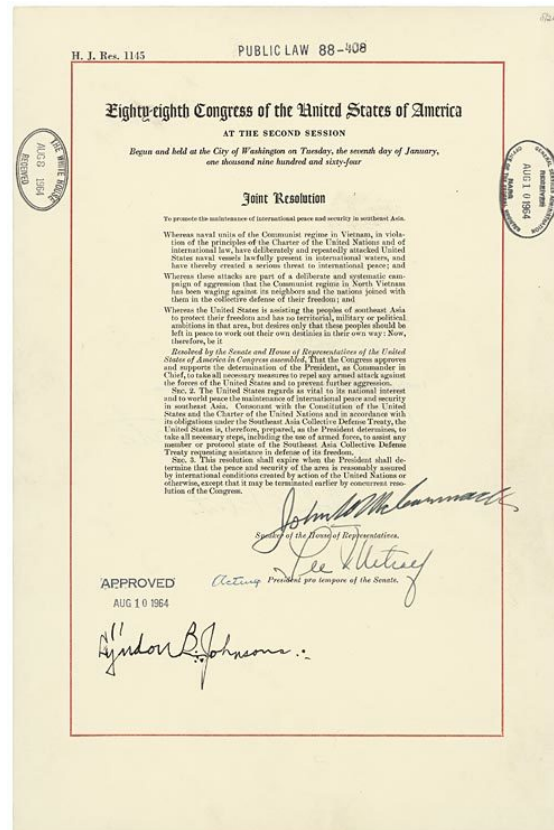
It is of historical significance because it gave U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson authorization, without a formal declaration of war by Congress, for the use of conventional military force in Southeast Asia. Specifically, the resolution authorized the President to do whatever necessary in order to assist "any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty". This included involving armed forces.

It was opposed in the Senate only by Senators Wayne Morse (D-OR) and Ernest Gruening (D-AK). Senator Gruening objected to "sending our American boys into combat in a war in which we have no business, which is not our war, into which we have been misguidedly drawn, which is steadily being escalated". (Tonkin Gulf debate 1964) The Johnson administration subsequently relied upon the resolution to begin its rapid escalation of U.S. military involvement in South Vietnam and open warfare between North Vietnam and the United States.

1 Background and Congressional action



President Johnson as he signs the resolution on August 10, 1964



The USS *Maddox*, a U.S. destroyer, was conducting a DESOTO patrol in the waters of the Gulf of Tonkin on August 2, 1964, when it reported being attacked by three North Vietnamese Navy torpedo boats from the 135th Torpedo Squadron,^[1] which were attempting to close their range on the *Maddox* for effective torpedo fire (1,000 yards was maximum effective range for the torpedoes)^{[2][3]} *Maddox* fired over 280 5-inch shells^[4] and the boats expended their 6 torpedoes (all misses) and some 14.5-mm machinegun fire. Breaking contact, the combatants commenced going their separate ways, when the three torpedo boats, **T-333**, **T-336**, and **T-339** were then attacked by four USN F-8 *Crusader* jet fighter bombers from the aircraft carrier USS *Ticonderoga*.^[5] The *Crusaders* reported no hits with their Zuni rockets, but scored hits on all three torpedo boats with their 20-mm cannons, damaging all three boats.

Two days later on August 4, the *Maddox* and the destroyer *Turner Joy* both reported to be under attack again, by North Vietnamese torpedo boats; during this alleged engagement, the *Turner Joy* fired approximately 220 3-

inch & 5-inch shells at radar controlled surface targets.^[6] Hanoi subsequently insisted that it had not launched a second attack. A later investigation by the **Senate Foreign Relations Committee** revealed that the *Maddox* had been on an **electronic intelligence (DESOTO)** mission. It also learned that the U.S. Naval Communication Center in the Philippine Islands, in reviewing the ships' messages, had questioned whether any second attack had actually occurred.^[7] In 2005, an internal National Security Agency historical study was declassified; it concluded that the *Maddox* had engaged the North Vietnamese Navy on August 2, but that there may not have been any North Vietnamese Naval vessels present during the engagement of August 4. The report stated:

It is not simply that there is a different story as to what happened; it is that no attack happened that night. [...]

In truth, Hanoi's navy was engaged in nothing that night but the salvage of two of the boats damaged on August 2.^[8] In 1965, President Johnson commented privately: "For all I know, our Navy was shooting at whales out there."^[9]

Within hours, President Johnson ordered the launching of retaliatory air strikes (**Operation Pierce Arrow**) on the bases of the North Vietnamese torpedo boats and announced, in a television address to the American public that same evening, that U.S. naval forces had been attacked. Johnson requested approval of a resolution "expressing the unity and determination of the United States in supporting freedom and in protecting peace in southeast Asia", stating that the resolution should express support "for all necessary action to protect our Armed Forces", but repeated previous assurances that "the United States ... seeks no wider war". As the nation entered the final three months of political campaigning for the 1964 elections (in which Johnson was standing for election), the president contended that the resolution would help "hostile nations ... understand" that the United States was unified in its determination "to continue to protect its national interests".^[10]

On August 6, U.S. Secretary of Defense **Robert S. McNamara** testified before a joint session of the **Senate Foreign Relations** and **Armed Services** committees. He stated that the *Maddox* had been "carrying out a routine mission of the type we carry out all over the world at all times" and denied that it had been in any way involved in South Vietnamese patrol boat raids on the offshore islands of Hon Me and Hon Nieu on the nights of July 30 and July 31.^[7] The administration did not, however, disclose that the island raids, although separate from the mission of the *Maddox*, had been part of a program of clandestine attacks on North Vietnamese installations called **Operation Plan 34A**. These operations were carried out by U.S.-trained South Vietnamese **commandos** under the control of a **special operations unit** of the U.S. **Military Assis-**

tance Command, Vietnam called the **Studies and Operations Group**.^[11]

After fewer than nine hours of committee consideration and floor debate, Congress voted, on August 10, 1964, on a joint **resolution** authorizing the president "to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the **Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty** requesting assistance in defense of its freedom". (H.J. RES 1145 1964) The unanimous affirmative vote in the **House of Representatives** was 416–0. (However, **Republican** Congressman **Eugene Siler** of **Kentucky**, who was not present but opposed the measure, was "paired" with another member who favored the resolution—i.e., his opposition was not counted, but the vote in favor was one less than it would have been.) The **Senate** conferred its approval by a vote of 88–2. Some members expressed misgivings about the measure, but in the end, **Democratic** Senators **Wayne Morse** of **Oregon** and **Ernest Gruening** of **Alaska** cast the only nay votes.^[12] At the time, Senator Morse warned that "I believe this resolution to be a historic mistake."^[13]

2 Repeal

By 1967, the rationale for what had become a costly U.S. involvement in the **Vietnam War** was receiving close scrutiny. With **opposition to the war** mounting, a movement to repeal the resolution—which war critics decried as having given the Johnson administration a "**blank check**"—began to gather steam.

An investigation by the **Senate Foreign Relations Committee** revealed that the *Maddox* had been on an **electronic intelligence** collection mission off the **North Vietnamese coast**.^[14] It also learned that the U.S. Naval Communication Center in the Philippine Islands, in reviewing ships' messages, had questioned whether any second attack had actually occurred.^[7]

The administration of President **Richard Nixon**, which took office in January 1969, initially opposed repeal, warning of "consequences for Southeast Asia [that] go beyond the war in Vietnam". In 1970 the administration began to shift its stance. It asserted that its conduct of operations in Southeast Asia was based not on the resolution but was a constitutional exercise of the President's authority, as Commander in Chief of U.S. military forces, to take necessary steps to protect American troops as they were gradually withdrawn^[15] (the U.S. had begun withdrawing its forces from Vietnam in 1969 under a policy known as "**Vietnamization**").

Mounting public opinion against the war eventually led to the repeal of the resolution, which was attached to the **Foreign Military Sales Act** that Nixon signed in January 1971.^[16] Seeking to restore limits on presidential authority to engage U.S. forces without a formal declaration of war, Congress passed the **War Powers Resolution** in

1973, over Nixon's veto. The War Powers Resolution, which is still in effect, sets forth certain requirements for the President to consult with Congress in regard to decisions that engage U.S. forces in hostilities or imminent hostilities.

3 Notes

- [1] Moise 1996, pp. 50, 78.
- [2] Moise 1996, p. 71.
- [3] Hanyok 2000.
- [4] Moise 1996, p. 78.
- [5] Moise 1996, p. 82.
- [6] Moise 1996, p. 158.
- [7] NYT 1968.
- [8] Hanyok 2000, p. 3.
- [9] KQED 2006.
- [10] President's Message to Congress 1964.
- [11] Andradé & Conboy 1999.
- [12] Kenworthy 1964.
- [13] Tonkin Gulf debate 1964.
- [14] Finney 1968.
- [15] NYT 1970.
- [16] NYT 1971.

4 References

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5 External links

- Original Document: Tonkin Gulf Resolution
- Ourdocuments.gov
- Peters, Gerhard; Woolley, John T. "Lyndon B. Johnson: "Special Message to the Congress on U.S. Policy in Southeast Asia," August 5, 1964". *The American Presidency Project*. University of California - Santa Barbara.

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